

*Maria Papoila*, An(other)  
Ideological Lesson from  
the *Estado Novo*

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# *Maria Papoila*, An(other) Ideological Lesson from the *Estado Novo*

## **Introduction**

This article describes how cinema, alongside many other recreational activities, was very commonly deployed and used as an apparently efficient tool within the propaganda mechanisms put into practice by the Portuguese *Estado Novo* in order to teach the new regime's so called true lessons to the 'Nation'. To support this argument I will refer to *Maria Papoila*, a film produced by Leitão de Barros in 1937, and expand on how this movie was clearly meant to represent an(other) ideological lesson taught by the *Estado Novo*, and dedicated to one of the humblest groups in the Portuguese society of that time.

## ***Estado Novo*, António Ferro and Propaganda**

Of the several features that define political regimes such as the Portuguese *Estado Novo*, in power between 1926 and 1974, I will highlight two factors so as to better support the purpose of this article. I will then focus on the importance attributed to rural and popular culture, on the one hand, and on the role performed by propaganda, on the other.

Nationalist or nationalist oriented ideologies believe that the true essence of nations is found away from the major cities, in the most remote locations, where people supposedly continue living as they once did at the beginning of that specific nation's history. In rural environments, the regional and national characteristics seem to have been frozen and stored away from any type of external intervention. This particular countryside somehow has allegedly enabled its inhabitants to embrace their religious and labor duties in a happy, honest and balanced way. According to such

beliefs, cities prevent this same humbleness and genuineness, and are home to people neither so happy nor so honest.

For sixteen years, António Ferro, the journalist who first introduced António de Oliveira Salazar to the Portuguese nation in 1932, shaped and nurtured the image of a new country triggered by the National Revolution of 1926 and shaped by the new political leader. In fact, as director of both the SPN (the Bureau for National Propaganda) and the SNI (National Bureau for Information, Popular Culture and Tourism) his key task was that of following Salazar's guidelines and implementing the most appropriate propaganda strategies ensuring that nationals and foreigners became acquainted with the 'real' and 'authentic' core of Portugal. Every area of society seemed to serve as an effective tool for the accomplishment of this goal. Thus leisure and recreational activities also fell under the close supervision of the regime and, with the help of effective censorship mechanisms, were designed to tell the 'Nation' nothing but its own true stories.

At this stage I should recall that Ferro had become a particular enthusiast of 'living images', as he referred to cinema after visiting the United States of America. Ferro co-wrote the script for *The May Revolution*, a movie about the 1926 revolution shown to visitors at the 1937 Paris International Exhibition.

### **Cinema during *Estado Novo***

Several authors (Nunes 305; Torgal, *Estados Novos*, Vol. I 56) consider the 1930s, and especially 1933, as a period crucial to establishing and implementing the Portuguese *Estado Novo*. In fact, 1933 saw Ferro's interviews of Salazar published in book form, a new Constitution founding a new political regime, a decree law setting up the new state police force with another launching the Bureau for National Propaganda, the kind of entity inherently required by such political regimes.

It should also be acknowledged how significant this same decade was to the young industry of cinema. In fact, 1933 was also the year that Portuguese sound cinema debuted. *Canção de Lisboa*, by Cottinelli Telmo, was the first movie with sound fully produced in Portugal. This was also when several later renowned movie directors such as Leitão de Barros —

the director of *Maria Papoila* —, Jorge Brum do Canto, Chianca de Garcia or Arthur Duarte began their professional activities.

In September 1933, the same decree law setting up the Bureau for National Propaganda stipulated cinema, as well as radio and theatre, as vital tools for spreading national propaganda across Portugal (Decree Law nr. 23:054, 25<sup>th</sup> September 1933). Cinema was thereby officially acknowledged as an effective way of showing the real nation both to the Portuguese and to an international audience. As Luís Reis Torgal stated, “cinema was an easy strategy for attracting the population and therefore a useful tool for spreading the images and the symbols of the nation” (Torgal, *Estados Novos*, Vol. II 77 — my translations). Everything which did not suit the ideology was necessarily withheld from plots, and cinema indeed proved as essential as any other propaganda strategy, such as folklore and tourism, as well as leisure and recreational activities, and, in particular, focused on teaching lessons about so called Portuguese feats, the country’s artists and popular culture. In 1935, Salazar himself stated that the major goal of cinema was to inform and to teach (Salazar 38). In August 1938, a magazine called *Viagem. Revista de Turismo, Divulgação e Cultura* mentioned that it “was impossible not to consider cinema as one of the strongest and most convincing tools of propaganda” (*Viagem. Revista de Turismo, Divulgação e Cultura*, nr. 2 August 1938 2).

Hence, it is correspondingly clear why the Portuguese regime under Salazar invested so much in the cinema industry. In the early 1930s, Leitão de Barros and Cottinelli Telmo teamed up to found Tóbis, a studio described in September 1934 by *Diário de Lisboa*, a daily newspaper, as “an important cell of national cinema” (*Diário de Lisboa* 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1938 2). The same article also referred to the effort and passion that had actually been put into opening these studios and fitting them with the most recent and modern equipment then existing. Tóbis would prevent Portuguese production from being influenced by the “environment that existed outside Portugal” (*Diário de Lisboa* 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1934 2), a fear that haunted Ferro, as prior to the launch of Tóbis some areas of film production were taken care of internationally, as Portugal did not have the necessary equipment and skills to do so at the time.

In 1935, the *Estado Novo* propaganda used mobile cinema, which Ferro labeled as the “caravans of images”, enabling the lessons approved

by the regime to be shown across Portugal and thus reaching the poorest but most 'authentic' groups of society. Two years later, the regime had already produced and broadcast over fifty documentaries about the particularities of the *Estado Novo*. That number kept increasing with new productions illustrating particular moments in Salazar's regime. In fact, the foundation and restoration commemorations of 1940, public displays of support for Salazar, the opening of the national stadium in Jamor, and life in the colonies all featured as the subject of several documentaries in the 1940s.

Indeed, the Bureau for National Propaganda decided to raise the number of Portuguese productions released and distributed and in 1946 Ferro and the National Bureau for Information, Popular Culture and Tourism (following a slight restructuring of the official bureau of propaganda) launched cinema awards for those movies best portraying the *Estado Novo* ideology and in which the characters were mainly historical or rural representations.

### ***Maria Papoila***

Leitão de Barros, the director of *Maria Papoila*, was labeled as Salazar's movie director since he was the producer of not only several films sponsored by the regime to promote its ideology, but also of several other events planned by the *Estado Novo*, such as the double commemorations of 1940. Not only was he involved, as aforementioned, in founding Tóbis, but he was also the director of the first Portuguese sound movie, although it was actually finished in Paris, *A Severa* (1931), a biography of a famous *fado* singer and her romantic life. The movie received epithets such as a 'real poem of the race' and the 'most Portuguese movie' ever, as described by the posters, which promoted it.

In turn, *Maria Papoila* was also produced by de Barros and released in 1937. It praises the brave deeds performed by a young rural woman played by Mirita Casimiro, who moves to the big city to work as a domestic servant, following a pattern common at the time. As expected, a conflict involving the man Maria Papoila loves go against the established order, which is only reorganized *in extremis* thanks to genuine feelings of that deemed best representative of the "Nation".

Maria Papoila is the name of the main character, a young girl born in central Portugal, in a small and remote village, who had never seen either the sea or a city. Her name encapsulates her own characteristics: *Maria*, a very common female name traditionally related with representations of purity and kindness, and *Papoila*, the name of a wild and apparently weak flower, the poppy, which actually proves a lot stronger than it first appears. Maria was consequently the easiest means to represent the values linked to rural life so greatly appreciated and advocated by Salazar and his regime. The young woman followed the same path imposed on thousands of Portuguese citizens at that time, and that involved travelling to either Lisbon or Oporto, the major cities, where they would strive to find work and to cope with fairly hostile environments, difficult not only to integrate into and understand but also even to survive. In this milieu their linguistic skills, outfits and behaviours in general would easily classify them as outsiders. Most of those watching *Maria Papoila* would also quickly and personally identify with the plot which told of the honest and brave journey of that naïve and happy girl on the train to the big city, where she would work, try to fit in and fight injustice.

Once in Lisbon, Maria fell in love with one of the guests in the house, where she was working as a domestic servant as her genuine and true feelings continued to shape her attitudes. The boy is accused of a crime of which he is innocent, but because he does not want to reveal the name of a rich urban girl with whom he was with at the time of the crime, he ends up in court. The miraculous solution happens when loving Maria Papoila dares compromise her honor so as to save the man she loves. Thus order is only reestablished because of the rural honesty portrayed by Maria Papoila.

A recurrent confrontation between urban and rural paradigms is identified throughout the movie. From the outset, during Maria's train trip to Lisbon, there is the loneliness and sadness of those travelling first class contrasting with the happiness and joy of the lower class passengers, who sing and dance throughout the entire journey. The first group includes a single representative of the city, while the second is composed of Maria and her travel companions, also soldiers, (i.e. the "true Nation") and those who defended and were ready to die for their homeland (*patria*).

This same confrontation continues when Maria arrives in Lisbon, where several public infrastructures were simultaneously under construction.

In this vibrant and bustling city, she encounters crowds, hears noises and visits bars packed with drunk and violent gamblers and women who are smoking and drinking. Lisbon's popular festivities organized by Ferro's Bureau for National Propaganda, drawing on the precious creativity of de Barros, were at the extreme end of urban leisure and recreation. These were the meeting points for domestic servants and soldiers and the places where they would dance and date, trying to reproduce the behaviours they had while in their rural country villages.

From beginning to end, *Maria Papoila* is organized around this confrontation between two opposite ways of living. The urban world and the rural world perceived respectively as dishonest and honest ways of life. Once the balance is broken, it is only the rural and honest essence of the "Nation" that restores order and saves the innocent, trapped by all the vices of the city.

### The Lesson

As David Corkill and José Carlos Almeida argue in *Commemoration and Propaganda in Salazar's Portugal: The Portuguese World Exhibition of 1940*, "cinema was identified as an important propaganda instrument. The government lavished resources on film and newsreel in order to ensure that its ideas were transmitted to audiences, and major public events were recorded on documentary films" (Corkhill and Almeida 7). Lauro António also maintains that the productions dating to the *Estado Novo* period did exhibit the ideology of Salazar even if conveyed in a rather disguised format (António 52).

When considering the film *Maria Papoila* (1937), the above-mentioned statements are easy to agree with. In fact, at first glance, what audiences watch is simply a love story that does not turn out as expected. However, this actually served as a means for presenting a very clear and detailed lesson on the new 'Nation' under construction by Salazar with precious assistance from Ferro and the Bureau of National Propaganda.

How far was *Maria Papoila* fiction? The plot reproduced thousands of personal stories, of individuals who had followed exactly the same path as Maria Papoila herself. Such narrative similarities to real life plots and



characters cannot but be understood as disguised moments of propaganda, since those watching the film would easily identify with a story deliberately constructed to that end and shown on the screen to ensure they accepted the lessons being taught.

Ten years after becoming Minister of Finance, Salazar published a set of posters called 'The Salazar Lesson'. Those documents were designed to clearly convey the human characteristics deemed worthy of praise by the *Estado Novo* and to set out the benefits generated by the new political paradigm. In several different places, Salazar gets referred to as professor of the 'Nation' (*Escola Portuguesa – Boletim do Ensino Primário Oficial*, 6<sup>th</sup> February 1936, n<sup>o</sup> 69 118, Ferro 1943 11-12) and would almost as often be mentioned as the politician empowered to speak about lessons handed down by the regime whether dedicated to the Portuguese people or to an international audience.

Bearing this in mind, I do not hesitate in arguing that *Maria Papoila* represents another regime-sponsored lesson with the clear purpose of emphasizing the distinct differences between the countryside (the real "Nation") and the cities (places lacking in national authenticity). In turn, this served to teach how the genuine national values of honesty and loyalty, so highly praised by the authorities, were only found in nature and rural communities, where external influences had failed to contaminate the true essence of Portugal.

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### ABSTRACT

Portugal lived in a nationalist oriented regime called *Estado Novo* for almost fifty years, between 1926 and 1974. The official mechanisms of propaganda were vital tools to validate the new ideology and recreational activities, for example, were important tools used by the bureau of propaganda to brief the “Nation” on the new truths of Portugal. Therefore, the regime invested a lot in the production of the kind of apparently light comedies which are still familiar to most of us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. 1937 *Maria Papoila* was produced by Leitão de Barros and praises the brave deeds of a young rural woman who moved to the big city to work. As expected, a conflict happens and it can only be solved thanks to the genuine feelings of that representative of the “Nation”. This article argues that *Maria Papoila* was used as an effective propagandistic strategy to teach another clear ideological lesson to the “Nation” of António de Oliveira Salazar.

### KEYWORDS

Portugal; *Maria Papoila*; propaganda; ideology; cinema

### RESUMO

Portugal viveu num regime político de cariz nacionalizante, designado por Estado Novo, durante quase cinquenta anos, entre 1926 e 1974. Os mecanismos oficiais de propaganda desempenharam um papel vital na legitimação da nova ideologia, tendo o Secretariado de Propaganda Nacional um importante aliado nas atividades de recreio organizadas para ensinar as novas da “Nação”. Neste âmbito, o regime investiu na produção de comédias aparentemente ligeiras que ainda hoje nos são familiares. *Maria Papoila*, realizada por Leitão de Barros, em 1937, elogia os ímpetus heroicos de uma jovem rural que foi para a cidade trabalhar. Como esperado, surge uma situação de conflito que acaba por ser resolvida *in extremis* graças aos sentimentos genuínos desta representante da “Nação”. Este artigo pretende discutir o modo como a película *Maria Papoila* foi usada como uma

estratégia propagandística eficaz para ensinar outra lição ideológica à “Nação” de António de Oliveira Salazar.

PALAVRAS CHAVE

Portugal; *Maria Papoila*; propaganda; ideologia; cinema

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